Media Consortium Final Report
June 25, 2018

On June 14, 2018, at the Allied Media Conference in Detroit, the Media Consortium met for its last time. The organization will close on June 30, 2018, having achieved its goals and mission. Of course, much more must be done to make the media system just and equitable. After a year-long visioning process concluding with the Detroit gathering, the Media Consortium membership and leadership concluded that the work to come requires a new way of thinking about media and media organizations.

**Mission Accomplished**

The Media Consortium has achieved the goals we announced at our founding. In a 2005 Pocantico Declaration, members declared that the purpose of the Media Consortium would be to amplify the voice of progressive independent media; increase our collective clout; and strengthen and transform our individual businesses.

Over the past thirteen years, thanks especially to the work of former director Tracy van Slyke and associate director Erin Polgreen, we built a sturdy, economically sustainable business model for progressive news centered on individual donor/members. As the number of news outlets fell dramatically, the Media Consortium grew by 200%. In a sign of sustainability, only five Media Consortium members have closed due to financial constraints since 2013, while a dozen have grown budgets well into the seven figures. Outlets like Mother Jones, Bitch, The Real News Network, Rewire and The Young Turks have become strong voices in the national media.

Starting in 2011, thanks to the work of current director Jo Ellen Green Kaiser and later, associate director Manolia Charlotin, we built a strong collaborative culture that has increased the impact of our members. While collaboration is becoming institutionalized now, our efforts showed large-scale collaboration was possible beginning in 2011 with coverage by 25 outlets of the takeover of the Wisconsin capital and with the Occupy May Day effort in 2012 that involved 65 outlets. In the six years since, the Media Consortium has run over forty collaborations, from a six-outlet look at pesticide use in Kauai to our current #DisHonoroll project on campus sexual assault. In groundbreaking work, we partnered with Prof. Gary King of Harvard on a scientific study that proved our collaborations have impact—a study published in Science magazine in 2017.

In addition to the business and collaborative efforts, the Media Consortium focused on advocating for the independent media. From 2012-2017 we ran a Media Policy Reporting Project, training over 50 reporters in the beat and producing over 300 media policy focused stories. We worked closely with RCFP to sign over two dozen amici briefs, and joined the coalition advocating for net neutrality. Behind the scenes, we supported efforts to release reporters from prison and to push back against the platforms.

We thank OSF for funding our business-related work in 2009-2011, the Voqal Fund for supporting the impact study in 2014-2017, and the Media Democracy Fund for funding our media policy work. Profound gratitude to the Quixote Foundation for its vision, and especially to the Wallace Global Fund, which provided general support from 2010-2018. Special thanks to the Foundation for National Progress, which served as our fiscal sponsor and gave us important in-kind support, and to the New Economy Coalition for their fundraising support and partnership on the New Economy Reporting Project.

**The Challenge of Racial Equity**

In 2015, Media Consortium Director Jo Ellen Kaiser identified racial equity as the next major challenge for the progressive news sector. Instead of focusing on building a “pipeline” for journalists of color, the Media Consortium chose to focus on building workplaces where journalists of color are decision-makers, the wielders of power instead of its beneficiaries.

From 2015 the Media Consortium has pursued that goal by

* Hiring Haitian-American Manolia Charlotin in 2016 as Membership and then Associate Director;
* Creating a TMCinColor listserv in 2016 as a safe space for journalists of color;
* Paying for 60 members to take a full-day racial equity workshop run by Race Forward in 2016;
* Using travel grants to ensure that 50% of our speakers and over 50% of participants at our 2016 conference were journalists of color;
* Bringing in journalists of color once again in 2017 and running our annual conference as an unconference to give every participant the opportunity to shape the organization’s direction.

This work, and the intentions around it, have already produced concrete changes among Media Consortium members. Bitch Media and Yes! magazine reorganized their staffs as a direct result of our 2016 meeting. Members like Scalawag, The Real News Network, Berrett-Koehler, and Democracy Now! found support for their already-existing efforts to employ a racial equity lens in their work.

As we moved deeper into equity work, however, we recognized that going further would require resources the Media Consortium did not have and was not able to obtain. Most journalism foundations seem more interested in funding mentorship and pipeline programs that move journalists of color from place to place rather than funding programs that create opportunities for journalists and business-side staff of color to obtain positions of power where they currently work.

We also came to understand that the best way to build a racially equitable journalism sector would be to center media and media makers working in communities of color—to build power from the grassroots to the grasstops, rather than keeping power at the top and drawing individuals up. The Media Consortium is not the best container for such work. It was founded originally by a small circle of elite, white-run (and mostly male-dominated) independent outlets, and despite efforts to democratize and diversify its membership, the organization’s history structures its programs, in much the same way that our skeletons determine our body size and shape.

The work of racial equity is ultimately deeply rooted in a set of social, moral and political values. Promoting racial equity (as opposed to racial diversity) means believing in the intersection of race and class; believing that the capitalist economy relies on the exploitation of black and brown people; and believing that white supremacy, patriarchy, mono-lingualism, ableism, and other power analyses are real and must be sites of contestation in our culture.

Journalism institutions--including journalism schools, journalism membership organizations, journalism foundations and the largest news outlets-- don’t want to hear these analyses. In their recent desire to appeal to the “Trump voter” or “middle America,” journalism institutions have been rejecting overtly values-based work, even as they admit that “objectivity” does not exist. What this means is that the work of racial equity in media is going to have to move to social justice spaces if it is going to find resources and partners.

**Where We Go From Here**

The journalism world is innately conservative—not in its partisan politics, which skew liberal Democrat, but in its refusal to adapt to new circumstances and a changing world. Nothing stands still, however, and there are exciting new efforts happening right now in the journalism sector.

New Voices New Jersey and New Voices North Carolina, run by Free Press and supported by the Democracy Fund, point to a community-centered vision for journalism. City Bureau is receiving generous support because they have developed a model for centering community that also maintains many traditional journalistic practices. The Boston Institute for Nonprofit Journalism has built ties between community outlets across Boston. Allied Media Projects has worked for over a decade to promote local media makers in Detroit, particularly individuals who cross boundaries between art, education, and reporting. And there are exciting projects happening in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Arkansas; Philadelphia, Baltimore, and elsewhere.

At our Detroit gathering this year, Media Consortium members were most enthusiastic about an effort begun by Anna Simonton which she has termed Movement Journalism. So were attendees at the Allied Media Conference, where 8 of the 10 Movement Journalism track sessions were so full that people were turned away at the doors.

Movement Journalism argues that social justice movements—and grassroots civil society efforts generally—should be as important to journalists as are Wall Street numbers or pronouncements by politicians. If we think the stock market rising is a story, why isn’t the rise of a people’s movement a story? If we will run a story about a politician’s ideas for affordable housing, why shouldn’t we run a story about a land trust that actually is making affordable housing a reality right now?

Movement Journalism is about empowering people in a community to tell the stories of their community—with journalists supporting them, rather than vice versa. Movement journalists are as willing to sit down with activists and advocates as we are to sit down with politicians and policy makers. Movement Journalism is being transparent about our values, even as we pursue a craft that requires us to follow a story where it leads.

Because we believe the future of journalism is local and community-centric, we are cautious about jumping to form a new organization. What the times require is a coalition instead of a Center, a network instead of an Institute. Leadership must come from those doing the work at the grassroots.

As that effort comes into being, we will work on specific projects: researching alternative economic models for journalism including coops and public funding; identifying organizations already doing grassroots journalism training and developing a curriculum based on best practices; and sharing power and building power by supporting hubs of local community news outlets.

We leave Detroit and the Media Consortium with energy to re-imagine what journalism can do and be. Stay tuned!